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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Radio Service

OFFICE OF INFORMATION

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT Thursday, March 21, 1935.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "CATCHING THE RAT." Information from the Bureau of Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Fall is hunting season for most animals. But spring is one of the best seasons for hunting our greatest animal enemy -- the rat. Spring is clean-up time generally and a good time to clean up any rats you happen to be entertaining. Then, in spring rats do great damage to baby chicks. Finally, early spring happens to be one of the most favorable times for breeding among these animals. So if you're interested in reducing the population of our most expensive and dangerous animal pest, now is a good time to do your bit.

You may think these are strong remarks to make about as small and common an animal as the rat. But your friends, the scientists in the Bureau of Biological Survey, who have investigated the rat and his ways, will go even further if you ask them. They'll tell you that the rat is man's chief rival for the possession of the earth -- yes, his chief competitor for the world's food supply. They'll tell you that each year rats destroy thousands of dollar's worth of food to say nothing of the buildings they damage, and poultry they kill. Two years ago New York State farmers, five thousand of them, turned in to their state college reports of the damage rats had done on their farms. They estimated about forty dollars a year apiece charged just to the rats on their property. That's one good example of the expense of keeping rats.

As for the danger from them, no doubt you know that rats are some of the worst disease carriers. Rats and the fleas they harbor were responsible for the great plagues that raged through Europe in earlier centuries. Rats still spread typhus-fever and other dangerous diseases.

These are just a few reasons why every season is open season on rats and why the Bureau of Biological Survey is glad to give you information on the most effective way of making a large kill when you're after rats.

If you plan to do a thorough job of rat hunting, you won't start out with a fancy hunting jacket, a double-barreled shotgun, and so on. Rats are usually too large in numbers, too quick and cunning, too inclined to be abroad by night to suffer much damage even at the hands of a crack shot. Better means of warfare against rats are poison, traps, gas and a good rat dog.

Poisoning is one of the most efficient ways of destroying all the rats on the premises, but its great disadvantage is its danger to domestic animals, poultry, and even human beings. Most poisons that will kill a rat will also kill your dog or cat or chickens. The exception to this rule is red squill. Squill is a bulb that grows wild along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Ground into powder it makes an ideal rat poison because it is relatively harmless to human beings and domestic animals but very poisonous to rats. Cunning as they are, rats will take the squill if it is mixed carefully with food they like.

Since rats are very wary about food prepared for them, you have to be as careful about the bait as about the poison. The experts have found that offering a variety of food instead of just one kind is the most effective bait. Rats seem to prefer a balanced menu. So offer them fish -- fresh fish ground up and mixed with squill powder; then, some freshly ground meat like hamburg steak seasoned with squill paste; also some cereal meal and squill moistened with milk or water; and finally some cut fresh fruit or vegetable with squill powder sprinkled on top. One of the best and certainly the neatest way to serve food to the rats in the house is wrapped in paper or in a closed paper bag. Be generous about the amount you offer. It will pay you to put sufficient poisoned food out so that every rat on the premises can have some. Otherwise the rats that missed out on this poisoned feast will be wary next time you try it. Put the bait out in the evening so it will be fresh when the rats are feeding. And destroy any uneaten bait in the morning; stale bait doesn't appeal to rat appetites.

Well, so much for the poison method. Trapping is just as effective as poisoning but it takes more skill and work. Many complicated traps and devices for poisoning rats are on the market but the simple and inexpensive snap trap is still the most effective. Here again a variety of fresh foods on successive traps will usually give better results than only one kind of bait. The experts have found that one of the best single baits is fresh doughnut. But rats will eat almost any food that you or I enjoy.

You can also often end rat trouble by pumping poison gas into their burrows or hiding places. Of course, fumigation of a whole building will also do for the rats but this is expensive and you have to call in experts to do it.

Finally, for hunting rats you can often rely on your best friend, the dog, especially if he happens to be a smart little terrier. These small dogs, when taught to hunt by themselves, will often keep a farm free from rats. Good ratters among cats are rare. If a cat is a skillful hunter he'll destroy the birds as well as the rats on your premises.

Well, there you have four good methods for getting rid of rats: poisoning with red squill, trapping, gassing, and leaving the matter to a good rat dog. But with these pests as with most others, prevention is usually better than cure. Naturally, rats need both food and shelter to live. If they are present around your home, they are finding good living there. Most modern buildings are built so that they are ratproof. If they aren't constructed that way to begin with, a few repairs will make them so. The most common places for rats to live and raise their families are the spaces between double walls and beneath floors. A carpenter can soon stop up such places and prevent the rats from getting in. Then, this matter of the rat's food supply. You can soon cut that off. That's simply a matter of storing all foodstuffs in rat-proof containers and disposing of waste and garbage in tightly covered receptacles. When rats are "at home" in any home, that's a good sign that wrong conditions in the building or in food disposal exist, say the experts.

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